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AIDS and Gay Rights

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The AIDS epidemic brought new debates over civil rights to attention. AIDS has never been just a disease, but was, and is, a political issue. Often AIDS as a political issue overshadowed AIDS as a disease. The first decade of the AIDS crisis provided both the pro- and antigay groups with new reasons and ways to fight for their position on gay rights. These groups adapted the political issues surrounding the disease to suit their own needs. AIDS is a political, social, and biological issue (Bayer, 1). Almost immediately AIDS was viewed as two distinct entities: AIDS the health crisis, and AIDS as a political and social event (Rofes, 10). AIDS the event made dealing with AIDS the disease difficult. As an event, different groups could use AIDS for different political reasons. The government, media, and the public seemed content to ignore the problem because it effected those who did not fit into the mainstream view of normal sexuality. Homosexuals, while fighting the disease, brought their sexuality into the open. AIDS brought debates over sexuality and gay rights into a health issue.

The issue of gay rights had been controversial long before the outbreak of AIDS. During the 1970's gay activists made some gains in civil rights for homosexuals. This previous "activism left a strong imprint on subsequent gay reactions towards AIDS"(Rom, 219). In the 1980's and early 1990's, AIDS became a gay rights issue.

Those suffering from the disease, especially gay men, had more than just a disease to fight. The spread of AIDS and the Republican gains in national politics during the 1980's threatened many of the previous accomplishments of earlier gay rights activists (Rimmerman, 58). Because gays are a sexually-identified group, and members of this group made up a majority of early victims, religious and social conservatives who opposed homosexuality were brought into the AIDS issue (Rom, 58). Especially in the 1980's and early 1990's, anti-gay groups were able to use the disease to fight against gay rights. When the AIDS epidemic broke out "the stigma of an often fatal disease was conferred on gay men, encouraging many Americans to become less tolerant of homosexuals"(Button "Politics of Gay Rights," 273). Mark Carl Rom

explains why many opponents of homosexuality saw AIDS differently than other diseases:

> Where as other ailments... could be seen merely as illness that should be eradicated, AIDS was seen by certain elements as divine retribution for sinful behavior. In this view, it was not the disease that should be eliminated but the behaviors- or perhaps even the groups- most closely linked to the disease. (Rom, 218)

The fear of getting AIDS made Americans less accepting of homosexuality. Those opposing gay rights were able to exploit this fear (Button, *Private Lives, Public Conflict*, 70). As a result of HIV/AIDS, "the gay community has felt the full force of a stigmatization process of media stereotypes, persecution, and phenomenal mistreatment on all levels from personal paranoia though the implementation of national policy" (Edwards, 151). The government used the public's fear as rationale for opposing legal protection. Institutions like "the media gave AIDS little attention, and the government... was loathe to devote resources to combating the epidemic. When combined with the antigay rhetoric the epidemic spawned, AIDS... highlighted the vulnerability and political weakness of the gay and lesbian community" (D'Emilio, 38). AIDS hardened political attitudes against homosexuals. It was used by conservative groups as proof that homosexuality was wrong. Groups such as the New Right "called AIDS 'retribution' and 'God's punishment' for a sinful lifestyle" (Button Private Lives, Public Conflict, 70-71).

A major obstacle to AIDS research and prevention was the attitudes of officials at various levels of government. Congress and the administrations of both Ronald Reagan and George Bush were unwilling to fund AIDS research or to provide HIV positive patients with treatments (Schroedel, 100). Robert Padgug and Gerald Oppenheimer argue that "the isolation felt by the gay community was further intensified by the ambivalent role played by the federal government. Normally a leader in the struggle against disease... the executive branch was loath to spend additional funds on a new disease that appeared to strike only or mainly at disliked populations" (Padgug, 255). Existing sodomy laws were used to prevent funding. These sodomy laws were used by opponents of gay rights in the government to remain inactive. Those against providing funds argued that the disease would not be spread if gays obeyed the laws (Haider-Markel 313). Especially "among conservative governments... state agencies have resisted popular pressure to fund research into AIDS or to provide support services for people living with the syndrome" (Adam, 178). The government maintained limited involvement. The government's action, or rather lack there of, showed how "AIDS has been an occasion for governments to do as little as possible, thereby allowing... the mass death of such traditionally stigmatized people as homosexuals" (178-179).

President Reagan was hesitant to combat the crisis, fearing that in doing so he would be seen as a supporter of gay rights (Padgug, 255). Reagan did not even speak on the issue until 1987, six years after the first reported cases (Cook, 86). He "openly courted the New Right with promises to resist government support for homosexuals (Button, *Private Lives, Public Conflict*, 70). By not getting involved with the AIDS crisis he could keep his promise and with it, the New Right's support.

Congress was also slow to act. Members were worried about public opinion and did not want to be viewed as pro-gay. AIDS was not seen as a pressing issue during the early years of the disease. One problem was that "lawmakers spent more time debating whether AIDS was an appropriate topic for the political arena than they did about how to deal with the epidemic" (Campbell, 352). At one point, Congress prohibited federal funds from being used on AIDS prevention programs fearing that safe-sex information targeted towards gay men would promote homosexuality (Lewis, 198). Even the few openly gay members of Congress tried to keep a low profile on AIDS policies (Rom, 225). As the disease later spread, and was no longer a gay only issue, Congress became more willing to deal with it (Campbell, 353).

Like those in the federal government, local politicians used AIDS to further both their careers and their antigay agendas. During the 1985 Houston mayoral campaign, the challenger hoped to use the public's fear of AIDS to get elected and push forward his antigay views. Kath Whitmire, a supporter of gay rights, had won both the 1981 and 1983 elections. As the fear of AIDS grew, voters turned out in large numbers to repeal by referendum a recently passed gay rights ordinance. The former mayor saw this situation as an indication of the voters' homophobia and as his chance to run again, stressing morality and opposing gay rights. When he was asked about what he proposed to do about Houston's growing AIDS problem, he responded, "Shoot the queers." Although Whitmire was able to win re-election, her opponent's attempt shows how those with antigay views were willing to use the AIDS crisis to further their cause (Button, *Private Lives, Public Conflict*, 70).

The Christian Right also saw AIDS as reason for further hatred towards gays. As a strong political constituency, they had influence over politicians and made sure their antigay views were heard. They launched "moralistic campaigns" against homosexuals (Adam 177). The Christian Right viewed homosexuality as immoral and held the "notion that homosexuals are dangerous, and if protected by law, they will threaten the entire community. Homosexuals are seen as purveyors of disease such as AIDS" (Green, 125). They believed that homosexuals were out to corrupt young Americans. Many feared and believed that HIV/AIDS education was being used by the gay movement as a way to introduce homosexual ideas to young people (Herman, 144).

Like the government and the Christian Right, the public also used AIDS as justification for their homophobia. Michael Nava and Robert Dawidoff explain that "the grounds given for denying gays and lesbians their rights are rooted in ignorance and bias" (Nava, xii). Ignorance regarding the disease led to increased intolerance. The identification of gay men as a high-risk group led many to wrongly and ignorantly

believe all gay men were diseased (Padgug, 254). At least in part due to these feelings, hate crimes against homosexuals increased during the 1980's (Button, *Private Lives, Public Conflict*, 70).

The public often expressed their homophobia. The public's growing prejudice towards homosexuals during the 1980's due to AIDS can be shown though surveys. Over twenty-five percent of those surveyed agreed either "strongly" or "somewhat" that AIDS was God's punishment for the immoral behavior of homosexuals. A majority stated that they had "not much" or "no" sympathy for people who were infected through homosexual activity (Yang, 482). Robert Dawidoff, co-author of *Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America*, wrote an article that appeared in the *LA Times* in 1993 expressing his disappointment in President Clinton for backing off his promise for equality in the military. In response to the article one reader wrote and mailed an letter to Dawidoff filled with words of hatred. Among these were, "No civil rights for perverts who spread AIDS" (Nava, 176).

The media, aware of the public's feelings and worried about how the issue would be viewed by mainstream America, shied away from reporting on AIDS/HIV. During its first decade, AIDS was often ignored because it was seen as a gay disease. The public's homophobia, as well as the nature of the disease, kept any real information off the nightly news. Timothy Cook and Davis Colby describe the way the media covered AIDS:

Stories often showed person-in-the-street commenting in ways that defied scientific understanding, even at the time, of how the disease could be spread, or expressing doubts that one could be absolutely sure. Reporters, hewing to the strategic ritual of objectivity, never specifically rebutted these misleading statements. (Cook, 101)

Often gay men were shown as responsible for their illness, while heterosexuals were portrayed as innocent victims (86-95). In the media "gay men were shown more often as carriers than as victims" (96).

One of the most controversial aspects in AIDS policy was the issue of prevention. Because HIV/AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, attempts to teach prevention brought up moral issues. Opponents who "favor chastity or monogamy can portray safer-sex education as government-supported education in immorality" (Rom, 227). In the early years of the epidemic, health officials moved slowly and the government did little to prevent the spread of HIV. Conservatives in Congress fought against prevention programs that they saw as sexually explicit. Less than twenty percent of all federal AIDS funding was used for prevention (228-229). The sexual nature of prevention educational materials was limited because the Center for Disease Control feared protest. These restrictions were counterproductive, and hindered the most important aspect of fighting the disease. They were enforced by those who wished to change AIDS from a scientific issue to a moral one (Bayer, 212-213).

Senator Jesse Helms was a major obstacle to prevention programs. In 1988, Helms proposed an amendment to an AIDS funding bill (Bayer, 218). This amendment would prohibit funding any educational material that, in Helmes words, could "pro-

mote or encourage directly, or indirectly, homosexual activities"(Rom, 228). This amendment did not allow prevention programs to target homosexual behavior (Rom, 228). He waved a sexually explicit safe sex comic book produced by the Gay Men's Health Crisis and denounced government encouraged sodomy. He refused to allow the government to financially aid groups that, in his view, advocated homosexuality, "which was the original source of the AIDS virus" (Bayer, 218). There was much support for his amendment and its passage hindered the fight against AIDS (Rom, 218). Senator Helms used AIDS to continue his moral crusade against homosexuality.

AIDS alone would have been hard enough for the gay community to fight, but the antigay groups use of the disease to further the prejudice against homosexuals made the battle even more difficult. The epidemic seemed to confirm the predictions of those with antigay beliefs (Rofes, 12). Fighting for gay rights and help for AIDS victims in the early years of the epidemic was not an easy task. Much stood in the activists' way. As Eric Rofes explains:

> By the late 1980's... it was impossible to stop the media, public health officials, and antigay crusaders from projecting a diverse array of meanings onto the epidemic. Try as we might to prevent AIDS from becoming stigmatized, because of the unexpectedness of its arrival, the furry of its force, and the populations it targeted, we watched helplessly as public health officials and television commentators attached a range of cultural meanings to the epidemic. Once that battle was lost, lesbian and gay communities threw themselves into combat with every powerful sector of the culture- journalists, doctors, politicians, movie stars, religious leaders- over the precise shaping of the event called AIDS. (11).

While acting to increase anti-gay sentiments, AIDS was also an awakening to homosexuals. One of the initial, and very difficult steps for the gay community was to identify itself with AIDS. Without this identification, they would be unable to unite to help those in their community suffering with the disease (Padgug, 255-256). The gay community was forced to act together in the face of this new crisis. AIDS changed the politics of the gay rights cause (Rom, 217). HIV/AIDS "pushed many homosexuals out of the closet, served to mobilize others, and ultimately thrust many into the political arena"(Button, Private Lives, Public Conflict, 70). AIDS did not cause homosexuals to hide their identities, as was expected, but rather increased the number willing to come out (Adam 175). The "epidemic was a critical factor in the emergence of the most recent wave of gay activism" (Wald, 22). The disease provided a new source of strength and reason to unite. It made existing divisions within the community much less significant. AIDS moved even the least political homosexuals to volunteer their time and money to help the cause (Padgug, 255-256). Homosexuals united to educate themselves and others about the disease, and

to offer care and support for victims (Rom, 217). The biggest challenge to the community soon became the most powerful source of strength and political momentum (D'Emilio, 38). Activists sought to empower the whole community, not just those with the illness (Padgug, 259). In this sense, gays were able to use the renewed sense of unity brought on by crisis for many other gay rights issues.

The AIDS crisis brought much more than the issue of disease to politics; it included broader gay rights issues. AIDS activism translated into a movement for gay and lesbian liberation (D'Emilio, 39). These included sexuality and civil rights:

> When some gays opposed the shut-down of bath houses, they did so because they feared the loss of the freedoms that allowed them to be left alone, not because they favored illness. When advocates of traditional public health measures called for mandatory HIV testing, most gays opposed this needless and reckless intrusion into their civil rights. (Rom, 219)

The attempts to close the bath houses were seen as a violation of the First Amendment and privacy issues. Those in the gay community argued that closing the bath houses would not halt the spread of AIDS (Bayer, 60). Another way homosexuals resisted intrusions into their privacy was to fight against mandatory AIDS testing. They were deeply suspicious of a government that was considering implementing this policy (114). Gay and civil liberty leaders insisted on a "voluntarist health strategy for combating AIDS" (207).

Cherry Grove, a gay beach community on Fire Island, New York, hard hit by the AIDS epidemic, used the community to ease the pain of the loss of friends. According to residents in 1991, more than forty homeowners and as many as 900 renters had died or were sick as a result of the disease. (Behrens, 64). The community "responded bravely and creatively to death weaving camp humor and a deep love for the community into a meaningful honoring of the dead" (Newton, 291). On Memorial Day, 1986, Cherry Grove had its first formal memorial ceremony for those who had died of AIDS as well as many recently lost elderly community members. Ester Newton, long time Grover and author of Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's Fist Gay and Lesbian Town wrote, "In the rest of America on this day people memorialized those who had died in war, but here we were memorializing people who in their lives showed courage on a different kind of battlefield" (295-296).

The concept of The Grove as a fun, party place made organized community response difficult; however, some community efforts did exist. David Behrens wrote, "The sex is safer, the lifestyle more cautious, the memories sadder every day -- and almost all the parties are benefits for AIDS" (Behrens, 64). Community members in the Pines, a predominately gay area next to Cherry Grove, started PAWS, the Pines Animal Welfare Society, to adopt and care for pets who's owners were lost to AIDS. In 1991 a benefit was held to raise money for a full-time physician for Fire Island

AIDS patients (64). On Fire Island, as in other parts of the country, the community was brought together to fight against AIDS.

Similar to the memorial services of Cherry Grove, the Names Project commemorated those killed by AIDS. Started in 1987, the Names Project AIDS Quilt created one of the most powerful AIDS memorials (The AIDS Memorial Quilt). Commemorative panels from all over the continent were put together into a quilt. Not only did this quilt serve to memorialize victims, the Names Project called attention to the importance of the AIDS crisis (Adam, 183). The 1989 tour of the quilt raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars (The AIDS Memorial Quilt). The Names Project AIDS quilt continues today.

Because the normal institutions that dealt with disease were inactive due to the circumstances surrounding AIDS, the gay community formed self-help organizations to deal with the crisis. Gays feared that the government would not act in the best interest of the homosexual community. Activists knew that they needed to demand their voices be heard by a government who seemed to be letting the disease run its course and wipe out gay men in the process (Rom, 220). One reason for the need for self-help organizations was "while media and public hysteria about AIDS was peaking in 1983 to 1985, public institutions typically shunned the work" (Adam, 179). Gay rights leaders, especially in New York and San Francisco, started coalitions to raise and lobby for funds to increase awareness and prevention programs. They also offered confidential testing and services for those suffering with the illness (Fox, 132). The AIDS crisis "unleashed vitally new constructive energy. Within a few years gays and lesbians had built a nationwide infrastructure of organizations... to combat the epidemic and the discrimination" (D'Emilio, 38). Gays reacted in the face of the epidemic by changing the nature of relationships. Friendships were formed. In the beginning these served as a source of emotional support. These friendship are what would lead to institutional organizations (Nardi, 118).

These newly formed activist organizations fought to combat discrimination. The lack of government funds prompted activists to begin these groups (Adam, 178). One such group was the Gay Men's Health Crisis, a New York based organization founded in 1981 and the oldest organization dedicated to AIDS (Bayer, 105). Mark Carl Rom explains that "although the GMHC does take political stands, it is first and foremost a community devoted to caring for its members (Rom, 222). One political action it did take was to sue the government to strike down the Helms amendment (229). Although Gay Men's Health Crisis opposed mandatory testing, they did encourage those in high-risk groups to get voluntarily tested (Fox, 209). The GMHC has helped the safe-sex effort at Cherry Grove. They placed nets filled with condoms at either end of the path entering the "Meat Rack," a wooded area known for its anonymous gay sexual encounters (Behrens, 64). ACT UP was one of the most militant of these newly formed activist groups. It was also established, "in part, as a reaction to what was seen as the political inactivity of the GMHC" (Rom,

222). The Lambda Legal Defense Fund was formed in an attempt to achieve full civil rights for homosexuals and victims of HIV/AIDS through impact legislation. The Lambda Legal Defense Fund selected cases with the hope of establishing legal precedents and bringing issues involving gay men, lesbians, and people with HIV/AIDS to the attention of lawmakers and the public (223).

The 1987 march on Washington was an attempt to fight AIDS and promote equality. The first Washington march for gay rights was held in 1979 and an estimated 100,000 people attended. AIDS effected the community so greatly that over a half million people attended the 1987 march. The march inspired homosexuals to come out proudly. Many, both gay and straight, left Washington and began working towards ending the spread of AIDS (D'Emilio, 39).

Like gay men, AIDS has encouraged many lesbians to become more politically active. Increased numbers of lesbians came out of the closet (Schneider, 174). Lesbians have put great attention into the politics regarding AIDS. Many did this in response to rising homophobia. AIDS brought together lesbians with gay men who they normally would not work with. In the past gay men and lesbians were often concerned with different issues. Why would so many lesbians volunteer to help with a cause that, on the surface, did not affect them? One reason was that "even though few lesbians have been infected with HIV, it remains an important political cause for both lesbians and gay men ... they recognized that the antihomosexual backlash triggered by the AIDS epidemic affected them as well as gay men" (Schroedel, 100). More often than heterosexuals, lesbians had contact with the gay men effected by HIV/AIDS (Schnieder, 160). Although some groups within the lesbian community opposed this new joining together, the efforts of lesbians greatly helped the AIDS cause. AIDS has also changed their position within the homosexual community by forcing more lesbians to be "willing to take the responsibility for a community it was often easy to let the men lead" (174).

AIDS was never just a disease, but rather, a political and social issue used by both supporters and opponents of gay rights. This is seen in the way that "gays and their allies, as well as those who opposed homosexuality all attempted to frame the political definition of AIDS that best suited their interests and ideologies" (Rom, 219). AIDS was a new reason for each to fight for their position, as well as a cause for this fight. Opponents could blame homosexuals for the disease and could use it to discriminate against them. Gays were pushed out of the closet and given new motivation to become involved in the political arena.

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